INTEROPERABILITY

The OSI Model and Its Role in the Real World

The whole Open Systems Interconnection effort resembles the Stalinist model of planned economies. You sit down ahead of time, come up with a five-year plan, and try to force everybody to obey the plan. Nobody listens, and five years later you come up with a new plan.

The world just isn't simple enough to enable a group of well-meaning bureaucrats to control all of the people all of the time. We should welcome diversity in computing and look for standards to emerge as the result of our experience building real networks.

That doesn't mean that there is no role for OSI. It has some use as a common procurement standard for very large organizations. It provides a great social forum for employees in large corporations to meet each other. And OSI has provided research funding for countless graduate students.

Carl Malamud

OSI will take its place alongside IBM's 2780/3780 protocols, Houston Automatic Spooling Program Remote Job Entry and Binary Synchronous Communications as one of many possible solutions to some common problems. The OSI solution may not be elegant, but it is in use and the job of the system integrator is to deal with the problem, not to preach gospel.

Think of your basic nightmare consulting assignment. The word processing pool has a Wang, production has a Digital Equipment Corp. PDP minicomputer, finance uses a specially programmed Hewlett-Packard, operations has IBM Systems Network Architecture, and senior management opted, after a long, intensive review, for OSI. After two years of muddling, the corporation has asked you to help tie this mess together and provide a common set of solutions.

As a consultant who hopes to get repeat business, you can't really get away with a religious sermon. "You should have bought OSI" won't cut it. "You should plan on migration to OSI" won't cut it either. Birds migrate, not corporations.

Instead, you have to roll up your sleeves and get to work. Application gateways, multiprotocol routers, common databases, and a host of other options need to be examined to help solve problems in the real world.

That's why we have to pay attention to OSI—it will be around for a while. Whether it's good or not is besides the point: We have to live with it. Even though the effort to make everybody do the same thing was misguided, that doesn't mean we can ignore it.

The International Organization for Standardization is the Barry Manilow of the standards world, trying to "write the songs that make the whole world sing." Like Manilow, of course, they write the songs that most of us fervently hope will not be playing in the next elevator we step into.

Although we have to live with OSI, that doesn't mean we are condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past. I listened to a Barry Manilow record once, and I will concede your right to join his fan club, but I'd sure like to keep Barry out of my living room. ■

CARL MALAMUD is writing Exploring the Internet: A Technical Travelogue, *a book that will be featured as The Interop Book at Interop '92 Fall. The opinions expressed are his own.*

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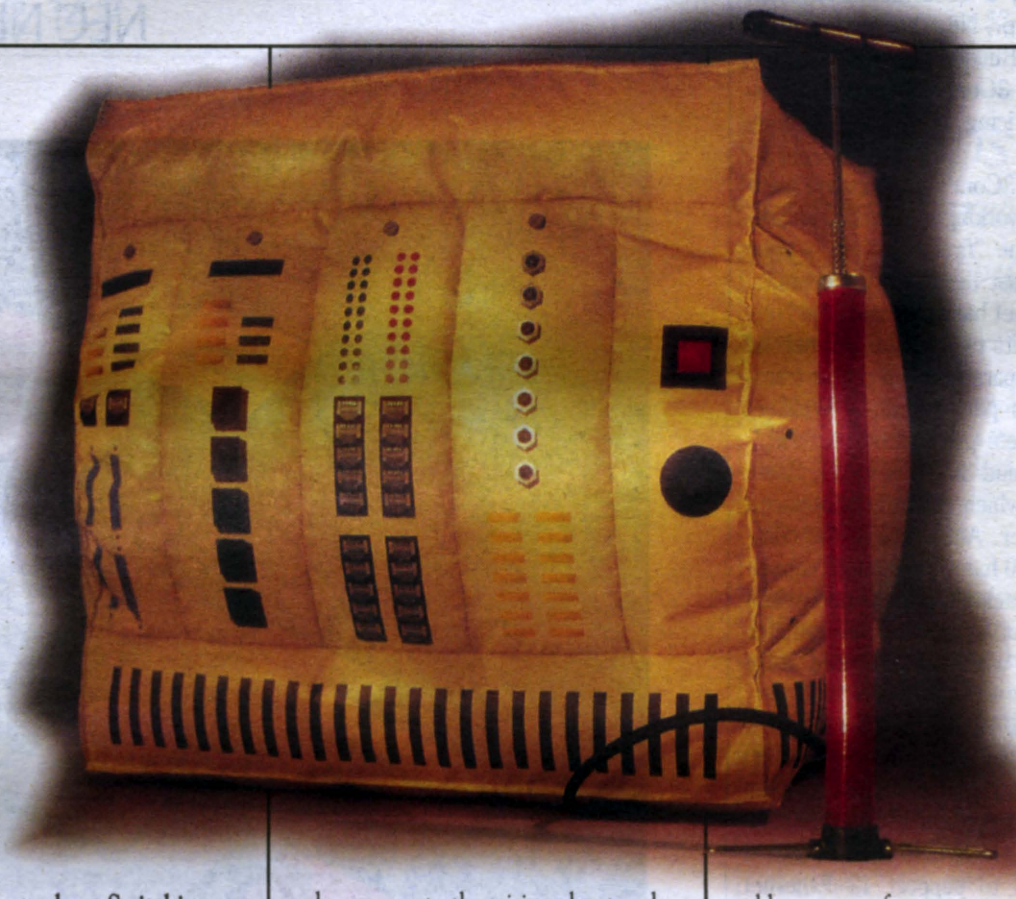

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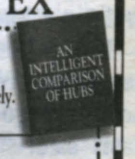

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